

Administration of Barack Obama, 2011

**Remarks to the General Assembly of the Union for Reform Judaism at
National Harbor, Maryland**

December 16, 2011

Thank you. Please, please have a seat. You're making me blush. *[Laughter]* Thank you, Eric, for that extraordinary introduction and for your many years of leadership in the Reform movement. And even though it is a few hours early, I'd like to wish all of you *shabbat shalom*.

Now, there are a lot of familiar faces in the house: David Saperstein, Alan Solow, Rick Jacobs, Howard Kohr.

I want to welcome Israel's Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Ehud Barak. The cooperation between our militaries has never been stronger, and I want to thank Ehud for his leadership and his lifelong commitment to Israel's security and the quest for a just and lasting peace.

I also want to recognize Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren, who's with us here today.

And finally, I want to give a shout-out to NFTY, I understand is in the house. Young people are going to lead the way, and they're leading the way. There you go. I'm fired up just listening to them. *[Laughter]*

I am honored to be here because of the proud history and tradition of the Union for Reform Judaism, representing more than 900 congregations, around 1.5 million American Jews.

I want to congratulate all of you on the golden anniversary of the Religious Action Center. As Eric mentioned, when President Kennedy spoke to leaders from the RAC in 1961, I was 3 months old, so my memory is a bit hazy. *[Laughter]* But I am very familiar with the work that you've done ever since, and so is the rest of America.

And that's because you helped draft the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. You helped to liberate Soviet Jews. You have made a difference on so many of the defining issues of the last half-century. And without these efforts, I probably wouldn't be standing here today. So thank you. Thank you. You have brought to life your faith and your values, and the world's a better place for it.

Now, since my daughter Malia has reached the age where it seems like there's always a bar or bat mitzvah—*[laughter]*—every weekend, and there is quite a bit of negotiations around the skirts that she wears at these bat mitzvahs. *[Laughter]* Do you guys have these conversations as well? *[Laughter and applause]* All right. I just wanted to be clear it wasn't just me. *[Laughter]* What time you get home.

As a consequence, she's become the family expert on Jewish tradition. *[Laughter]* And if there's one thing I've learned from her, it's that it never hurts to begin a speech by discussing the Torah portion. *[Laughter]* It doesn't hurt.

So this week—*[laughter]*—congregations around the world will retell the story of Joseph. As any fan of Broadway musicals will tell you—*[laughter]*—there is a lot going on in this reading. *[Laughter]* But many scholars have focused on a single word that Joseph uses when he replies to his father Jacob.

In Hebrew, that word is *hineni*. It translates, "I"—[*applause*]*—*it translates to "Here I am." *Hineni*. It's the same word Abraham uses to reply to God before the binding of Isaac. It's the same word Moses uses when God summons him from the burning bush: *Hineni*. The text is telling us that while Joseph does not know what lies ahead, he is ready to answer the call.

In this case, *hineni* leads Joseph to Egypt. It sets in motion a story of enslavement and exodus that would come to inspire leaders like Martin Luther King as they sought freedom. It's a story of persecution and perseverance that has repeated itself from Inquisition-era Spain to Czarist Russia to Hitler's Germany.

And in that often tragic history, this place, America, stands out. Now, we can't whitewash the past. Like so many ethnic groups, Jews faced prejudice, and sometimes violence, as they sought their piece of the American Dream. But here, Jews finally found a place where their faith was protected, where hard work and responsibility paid off, where no matter who you were or where you came from, you could make it if you tried. Here in America, you really could build a better life for your children.

I know how much that story means to many of you, because I know how much that story means to me. My father was from Kenya, my mother was from Kansas—not places with a large Jewish community. [*Laughter*] But when my Jewish friends tell me about their ancestors, I feel a connection. I know what it's like to think, "Only in America is my story even possible."

Now—I have to interrupt. My friend Debbie Wasserman Schultz just got in the house. She was—[*applause*]

Now, the Jewish community has always understood that the dream we share is about more than just doing well for yourself. From the moment our country was founded, American Jews have helped make our Union more perfect. Your parents, your grandparents, your great-grandparents, they remembered what it was like to be a stranger, and as a result treated strangers with compassion. They pursued *tikkun olam*, the hard work of repairing the world.

They fought bigotry because they had experienced bigotry. They fought for freedom of religion because they understood what it meant to be persecuted for your religious beliefs. Our country is a better place because they did. The same values that bring you here today led Justice Brandeis to fight for an America that protects the least of these. Those same values led Jewish leaders to found RAC 50 years ago. They led Abraham Joshua Heschel to pray with his feet and march with Dr. King. And over the last 3 years, they have brought us together on the most important issues of our time.

When we began this journey, we knew we would have to take on powerful special interests. We would have to take on a Washington culture where doing what's politically convenient is often valued above doing what's right, where the focus is too often on the next election instead of the next generation.

And so time and time again, we've been reminded that change is never easy. And a number of the rabbis who are here today, when I see them, they've been saying a prayer. They notice my hair is grayer. [*Laughter*] But we didn't quit. You didn't quit. And today, we're beginning to see what change looks like.

And Eric mentioned what change looks like. Change is the very first bill I signed, the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, which says in this country an equal day's work gets an equal day's pay. That's change.

Change is finally doing something about our addiction to oil and raising fuel efficiency standards for the first time in 30 years. That's good for our economy, it's good for our national security, and it's good for our environment.

Change is confirming two Supreme Court Justices who will defend our rights, including our First Amendment rights surrounding religion—happen to be two women, by the way. That's also a good thing.

Change is repealing "don't ask, don't tell," so that in the first time in history, you don't have to hide who you love to serve the country that you love. That's change.

Change is working with the Reform movement and other faith-based groups to reform the Federal faith-based initiatives, improving the way we partner with organizations that serve people in need.

Change is health care reform that we passed after a century of trying, reform that will finally ensure that in the United States of America, nobody goes bankrupt just because they get sick. That's change.

Change is the 2.5 million young people—maybe some of those NTTY folks—who have already—*[applause]*—who have health insurance on their parents' plans because of the Affordable Care Act. That's change.

It's making family planning more accessible to millions of Americans. It's insurance companies not being able to charge you more just because you're a woman or deny you coverage if you have breast cancer.

Change is committing to real, persistent education reform, because every child in America deserves access to a good school and to higher education—every child.

And change is keeping one of the first promises I made in 2008: After nearly 9 years, our war in Iraq is ending this month and our troops are coming home.

That's what change is. And none of this would have happened without you. That's the kind of change we'll keep fighting for in the months and years ahead.

And just last night you took another step towards the change we need and voted for a set of principles of economic justice in a time of fiscal crisis. And I want to thank you for your courage. That statement could not have come at a more important time, for as you put it, we're at a crossroads in American history. Last Tuesday I gave a speech in Osawatomie, Kansas, where I described that crossroads. And I laid out a vision of our country where everybody gets a fair shot, and everybody does their fair share, and everyone plays by the same rules. And these are not Democratic values or Republican values; they're not Christian values or Jewish values or Hindu or Muslim values. They're shared values, and we have to reclaim them. We have to restore them to a central place in America's political life.

I said it last week, I'll say it again: This is not just a political debate; this is a moral debate, this is an ethical debate, it's a values debate. It's the defining issue of our time. It is a make-or-break moment for the middle class and for all those who are fighting to get into the middle class and for those of us who remember parents or grandparents or great-grandparents who had to fight to get in the middle class, but they understood that the American Dream was available to them because we were all in it together. That's what this is about. And last night you reaffirmed the moral dimension of this debate.

We have to decide who we are as a country. Is this a place where everyone is left to fend for themselves, the most powerful can play by their own rules? Or do we come together to make sure that working people can earn enough to raise a family, send their kids to college, buy their own home, have a secure health care and a secure retirement? That is the story that almost all of us here share, in one way or another. This is a room full of folks who come from immigrants and remember what it was like to scratch and claw and work. You haven't forgotten. You know what it's like to see those in your own family struggle.

Well, we have to apply those same values to the American family. We're not a country that says, you're on your own. When we see neighbors who can't find work or pay for college or get the health care they need, we answer the call. We say, "Here I am," and, "We will do our part."

That's what you affirmed last night. But more importantly, it's what you affirm every day with your words and your actions. And I promise you that as you pray with your feet, I will be right there with you every step of the way. I'll be fighting to create jobs and give small businesses a chance to succeed. I'll be fighting to invest in education and technology. I will fight to strengthen programs like Medicare and Social Security. I will fight to put more money in the pockets of working families. I won't be afraid to ask the most well off among us—Americans like me—to pay our fair share, to make sure that everybody's got a shot. I will fight alongside you every inch of the way.

And as all of you know, standing up for our values at home is only part of our work. Around the world, we stand up for values that are universal, including the right of all people to live in peace and security and dignity. That's why we've worked on the international stage to promote the rights of women, to promote strategies to alleviate poverty, to promote the dignity of all people, including gays and lesbians and people with disabilities, to promote human rights and democracy. And that's why, as President, I have never wavered in pursuit of a just and lasting peace: two states for two peoples, an independent Palestine alongside a secure Jewish State of Israel. I have not wavered and will not waver. That is our shared vision.

Now, I know that many of you share my frustration sometimes, in terms of the state of the peace process. There's so much work to do. But here's what I know. There's no question about how lasting peace will be achieved. Peace can't be imposed from the outside. Ultimately, it is the Israelis and the Palestinians who must reach agreement on the issues that divide them.

And the fact that peace is hard can't deter us from trying. Because now more than ever, it's clear that a just and lasting peace is in the long-term interests of Israel. It is in the long-term interests of the Palestinian people. It is in the interest of the region. It is the interest of the United States, and it is in the interest of the world. And I am not going to stop in pursuit of that vision. It is the right thing to do.

Now, that vision begins with a strong and secure State of Israel. And the special bonds between our nations are ones that all Americans hold dear because they're bonds forged by common interests and shared values. They're bonds that transcend partisan politics—or at least they should.

We stand with Israel as a Jewish democratic state because we know that Israel is born of firmly held values that we, as Americans, share: a culture committed to justice, a land that welcomes the weary, a people devoted to *tikkun olam*.

So America's commitment and my commitment to Israel and Israel's security is unshakeable. It is unshakeable.

I said it in September at the United Nations. I said it when I stood amid the homes in Sderot that had been struck by missiles: No nation can tolerate terror. And no nation can accept rockets targeting innocent men, women, and children. No nation can yield to suicide bombers.

And as Ehud has said, it is hard to remember a time when the United States has given stronger support to Israel on its security. In fact, I am proud to say that no U.S. administration has done more in support of Israel's security than ours—none. Don't let anybody else tell you otherwise. It is a fact.

I'm proud that even in these difficult times we've fought for and secured the most funding for Israel in history. I'm proud that we've helped Israel develop a missile defense system that's already protecting civilians from rocket attacks.

Another grave concern—and a threat to the security of Israel, the United States, and the world—is Iran's nuclear program. And that's why our policy has been absolutely clear: We are determined to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. And that's why we've worked painstakingly from the moment I took office with allies and partners, and we have imposed the most comprehensive, the hardest hitting sanctions that the Iranian regime has ever faced. We haven't just talked about it, we have done it. And we're going to keep up the pressure. And that's why, rest assured, we will take no options off the table. We have been clear.

We're going to keep standing with our Israeli friends and allies, just as we've been doing when they've needed us most. In September, when a mob threatened the Israeli Embassy in Cairo, we worked to ensure that the men and women working there were able to get out safely. Last year, when raging fires threatened Haifa, we dispatched fire-fighting planes to help put out the blaze.

On my watch, the United States of America has led the way, from Durban to the United Nations, against attempts to use international forums to delegitimize Israel. And we will continue to do so. That's what friends and allies do for each other. So don't let anybody else tell a different story. We have been there, and we will continue to be there. Those are the facts.

And when I look back on the last few years, I'm proud of the decisions I've made, and I'm proud of what we've done together. But today isn't about resting on our laurels. As your tradition teaches, we're not obligated to finish the work, but neither are we free to desist from it.

We've got to keep going. So today we look forward to the world not just as it is, but as it could be. And when we do, the truth is clear: Our Union is not yet perfect. Our world is still in desperate need of repair. And each of us still hears that call.

And the question is, how will we respond? In this moment, every American, of every faith, every background has the opportunity to stand up and say: Here I am—*Hineni*. Here I am. I am ready to keep alive our country's promise. I am ready to speak up for our values at home and abroad. I am ready to do what needs to be done. The work may not be finished in a day, in a year, in a term, in a lifetime, but I'm ready to do my part.

And I believe that with tradition as our guide, we will seize that opportunity. And in the face of daunting odds, we will make the choices that are hard, but are right. That's how we've overcome tougher times before. That's how we will overcome the challenges that we face today. And together, we will rewrite the next chapter in America's story and prove that our best days are still to come.

Thank you. God bless you. God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:37 p.m. at the Gaylord National Hotel & Convention Center. In his remarks, he referred to Eric H. Yoffie, president, and Richard Jacobs, president-elect, Union for Reform Judaism; David Saperstein, director and counsel, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism; Alan P. Solow, former chairman, Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations; and Howard Kohr, executive director, American Israel Public Affairs Committee. He also referred to the North American Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY).

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Union for Reform Judaism, general assembly at National Harbor, MD.

Locations: National Harbor, MD.

Names: Barak, Ehud; Jacobs, Richard; Kagan, Elena; Kohr, Howard; Obama, Malia; Oren, Michael; Saperstein, David; Solow, Alan P.; Sotomayor, Sonia M.; Wasserman Schultz, Deborah; Yoffie, Eric H.

Subjects: Armed Forces, U.S. : "Don't ask, don't tell" policy, repeal; Civil rights : Civil rights movement; Civil rights : Freedom of religion; Civil rights : Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009; Civil rights : Minorities :: Anti-Semitism; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Education : Standards and school accountability; Energy : Fuel efficiency standards, strengthening efforts; Faith-based and community organizations : Programs and services; Foreign policy, U.S. : Civil and human rights, promotion efforts; Health and medical care : Health insurance reforms; Health and medical care : Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act; Iran : Nuclear weapons development; Iran : U.S. and international sanctions; Iraq : U.S. military forces :: Deployment; Israel : Ambassador to U.S.; Israel : Minister of Defense; Israel : Relations with U.S.; Israel : Security cooperation with U.S.; Israel : Terrorist attacks; Israel : U.S. assistance; Judiciary : Supreme Court :: Associate Justices; Maryland : President's visits; Middle East : Arab-Israeli conflict, peace process; Union for Reform Judaism.

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